

Once in the suburbs: some historical notes on bird watching and collecting in Melbourne

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Abstract

The historical records of observations of birdlife within the Melbourne suburban area date from the beginning of European settlement, although they provide little hard evidence regarding local species. The activities of members of FNCV and other individuals, particularly from the early 1880s contributed to a better and more complete picture of local birds. Today, many of the species that were the subject of interest to collectors are rare or endangered. Thanks to the activities of those collectors, however, we can at least refer to a range of records to gain an understanding of the characteristics of the birds that once lived in the suburbs. (*The Victorian Naturalist* 126 (3), 2009, 64-69)

Keywords: Historical records; *The Victorian Naturalist*; suburban bird species

Introduction

The title of this paper is taken in part from an article by a former editor of this journal, GM Ward. In 1966 Ward tried to indicate what he felt could be reconstructed of the pre-European fauna of landscapes subsequently covered by Melbourne's suburbs (Ward 1966). It was an interesting idea at the time, and it is still an interesting idea (Presland 2008). Of course a lot of change has occurred in Melbourne's natural environments in the past 40 years, so it may have been a little easier to do in Ward's day; but even now it remains a fascinating historical objective. Ward's article includes a map of the Melbourne area, showing the distribution of some suburban fauna (Fig. 1). The bulk of the fauna marked on this map are avifauna, so reconsideration of it presents a useful point of introduction to the subject of 'birds in the suburbs'.

One interesting feature of the distribution of suburban fauna displayed in this map is the way in which it is grouped. Being an historical survey, Ward's drawing of the distribution patterns of birds in the suburbs was based on fieldwork previously carried out, often by members of the Field Naturalists Club (FNCV), and published in *The Victorian Naturalist*. The bird species plotted on the map for the area between Doncaster and Ashburton/Caulfield, for example, were those reported by Robert Hall between 1894 and 1898 in the 'Box Hill district', (for more detail see below). Other groupings represent the record of numerous rambles by members of the FNCV in

the Sandringham heathland (see, for example, French 1890; Hart 1890); observations in the old Surveyors' Paddock (Campbell 1899); a report of birds in Royal Park (Anon 1891); and an excursion to the Plenty River (Le Souef 1891).

The work of the early members of the FNCV was important, of course, in developing our knowledge and understanding of birdlife in what are now suburban areas. But observations of birdlife in the Melbourne area were recorded long before the FNCV was formed; indeed, this occurred from the earliest days of European occupation of the area, about 50 years before the formation of the Club in 1880. This brief paper looks back to some of the early observations on local birdlife, the object being to provide brief glimpses of early bird watching and collecting activities in the Melbourne area. These observations lead into the early bird-watching activities of the Field Naturalists Club, reports of some of which are included here. The period thus covered is about 65 years: from the beginnings of European settlement in the Port Phillip region to the end of the 19th century. The intention and hope is that this paper will provide something of an introduction to the subject of a symposium on the theme of urban birds.

19th century perspectives

Before referring to particular reports of birdlife in this area, however, and by way of providing a context to early observations, it is worth mentioning briefly an opinion regarding Australian

bird life that was prevalent in the 19th century. This view, expressed in print on a number of occasions (e.g. Martin 1835, 1839), was that the birds of Australia were without song. This is worth mentioning because it was a notion that informed the thinking not only of naturalists but of a wide range of people. Edward Stone Parker, for example, a London teacher who was appointed as an Assistant Protector of Aborigines in 1838, was apparently familiar with Martin's writings on the natural history of Australia. Indeed, he commented on such to his superior GA Robinson in January 1840 while travelling in central Victoria (Presland 1977).

John Cotton, a man of some ornithological experience, was clearly influenced by the same views; in describing the birdlife in the new township of Melbourne, Cotton wrote (1843:20):

Numerous birds of elegant plumage attract the eye if they do not engage the ear by their musical notes, but they are not all devoid of mellifluous song. Several species of parrakeets [*sic*] are seen amongst the gum trees, licking their food from the calyx of the blossom ...

The view expressed by Martin probably had two sources: in the first place it was considered generally by 19th century European ornithologists that avian species had begun in the northern hemisphere before radiating out to distant southern locations (Boles 1995, 1997; Barnett 1997). From this perspective it was easy, then, to see Australian birds as inferior, for example lacking in song. It was an expression of the way in which Europeans viewed the Australian fauna as a whole—it was completely foreign and (therefore) strange. The idea that Australian birds did not sing also reflected the opinion of many early settlers, whose ears were accustomed to European birdsong and who thus did not appreciate the very different songs of Australian birds. Actually, it is ironic that people should have thought this, because recent fossil finds suggest that songbirds actually evolved on the Australian continent (Boles 1995, 1997)

Cotton was also an artist and prepared a number of watercolours of birds of the Port Phillip region, drawings that he hoped might serve as illustrations in a book. The book didn't appear in his lifetime, but the paintings survive in a private family collection (McEvey 1974) (Fig. 2). Whilst they do not provide any detailed information regarding the taxonomy or

distribution of the illustrated species, for what they are worth these images represent perhaps the earliest pictures of these birds.

Early bird sightings

One of the earliest recorded word pictures referring to birdlife in the Port Phillip area was made within two years of European settlement. Following a short visit to Port Phillip early in 1837, Thomas Winter wrote to the botanist William Swainson reporting *inter alia* on the fauna of the area, including the birdlife (Winter 1898):

Owls are numerous, and there is a great variety; so are eagles and hawks. White parrots abound. Indeed there is a great variety of this tribe, some very beautiful. Quails are very plentiful, one species being very rare; their colour nearly black, with red spots.

Of course, such fleeting, once-off and non-specific observations are of little scientific value. But they do serve as a reminder of a couple of considerations regarding historical observations: season and circumstance. The earliest European visit to the Melbourne area was in February 1803, by a party intent on making an assessment of the area for the purposes of permanent settlement. Birdlife was of less consideration than good soil, timber and fresh water. Occasional references to birds are made, but there is nothing of any import regarding avian species, in the written account of the expedition (Flemming 1879).

However, once Europeans permanently occupied the area, observations on the local birdlife began to be recorded regularly. Birds were noted in all of the various environments around the Port Phillip area; initially, of course, most observations were made in the vicinity of the town. For example, West Melbourne Swamp in the period before the 1860s, when reclamation of the wetland area was begun, was described (Mattingley 1916:83) as one where:

graceful swans, pelicans, geese, black, brown and grey ducks, teal, cormorants, water hen, sea gulls ... disported themselves; while curlews, spur-winged plover, cranes, snipe, sandpipers and dotterals either waded in the shallows or ran along its margin; and quail and stone plover ... were very plentiful ...

Most of these birds were to be found across the entire area of the Yarra estuary for some part of the year. Along the Yarra itself, birdlife was abundant. In the early days of the settle-



Fig. 2. A Ground Thrush (now Bassian Thrush) *Zosteroterpus lunulata* as drawn by John Cotton, in 1843.

ment, travellers on the river noted particularly the Nankeen Night-Heron (sometimes called Rufous Night-Heron) *Nycticorax caledonicus* in the adjacent shrubs and bushes (Backhouse 1843). The wetlands in low-lying areas in Footscray, immediately to the west of the Maribyrnong River, provided rich feeding grounds for wild geese, as well as places to breed. The birds flocked in such numbers that on occasions the sky was darkened by their flight and the area became known as Gosling Flat (Anon 1960).

Emus were once a common sight on the open grassy plains around Port Phillip. When was the last time anybody was approached by an Emu in Dandenong? No doubt it hasn't happened recently, but in the 1840s the species was so common in the locality that settlers had trouble keeping emus out of their tents. In a letter to GA Robinson, William Thomas (1839) observed that the alluvial flats around the Dandenong area

... were the resort of the emu and kangaroo, so numerous were these animals but 18 months back that it was not uncommon for emus to come up to the hut and tent door but not so now.

Almost exactly a year later he wrote that 'there is but little game within 20 miles of Melbourne'

(Thomas 1840), and by the mid 1850s Horace Wheelwright could comment that 'an emu ... killed within forty miles of the town would be a matter of history'. Wheelwright was a professional shooter, who made his living by providing game for the tables of the growing town, so to some extent he was responsible for the fact that game birds had become scarce. In his memoir of 1861 (1979) Wheelwright listed more than 180 species he had sighted within a 40 mile (64 km) radius of Melbourne. Wheelwright 'bagged' many of these species but unfortunately his memoirs do not provide precise details regarding the locations where the birds were shot.

On the plains to the north and west of Melbourne, Australian Bush turkeys also were plentiful in the early days of European settlement (Edwards 1854). It was not uncommon to see as many as 30 birds in a single flock, despite the belief by some bushmen that these birds were shy in their habits (Wheelwright 1879).

FNCV activities

No doubt the influx of large numbers of settlers to the region, particularly following the

discovery of gold in the colony in 1851, had detrimental effects on local birdlife. However, even as late as 1890, there were at least 13 avian species still living and breeding in the area of Royal Park (Anon 1891).

Further out from the city there were better prospects for observing birds. In the Box Hill district, for example, there were numerous excursions by members of the FNCV to document and collect birds and their eggs, particularly following the opening of a rail line to Lilydale in 1883. As a result of these fieldtrips, between 1896 and 1900 there were nine papers published in *The Victorian Naturalist*, all by Robert Hall (Hall 1894, 1896a, 1896b, 1896c, 1897a, 1897b, 1898a, 1898b, 1898c, 1898d). The author refers in the titles of these pieces to the 'Box Hill District' but in fact the articles focused on a greater area than that: the occurrence of birds was recorded in a roughly triangular area that extended from Doncaster in the north to Oakleigh in the south, and as far to the east as Bayswater (Hall 1894). Of particular interest were the valleys of Koonung Koonung, Blackburn and Gardiners Creeks. The wooded nature of that area ensured that particular species were likely to be represented, including varieties of cuckoos, honeyeaters, owls, swallows and pardalotes. Over the series of articles, Hall details all of the birds that comprised the major families; today this is an invaluable record. Summarising the data collected over a period of five years, Hall noted that of the 106 native species of birds observed in the area, 36 resided there all year, and the other 70 were migrants, generally arriving in spring to nest and rear their young.

Other members of the FNCV were active at the same time, in these and other areas. AJ Campbell, who was first elected to the Club in 1881 and was a Committee Member in the latter part of the 1880s, maintained his bird observation and collecting activities over many decades and across the entire continent, including Melbourne and its suburban area. He was an active participant at Club meetings, an exhibitor of eggs and bird skins and a regular contributor to *The Victorian Naturalist* until his death in 1926. To give him his due, Campbell was also an active proponent, through the FNCV, of the protection of native species (Anon 1885). His magnum opus *Nests and eggs of Australian birds*

was published in two volumes in 1900 and contains interesting observations and remarks on native species. Some of these remarks are worth relating here in the context of avifauna in the Melbourne suburban area.

On what was originally called the Warty-faced Honeyeater (now Regent Honeyeater) *Anthoacera phrygia*, Campbell wrote (1900:382):

I recollect one season in November—1868 or 1869—when these birds were plentiful in the neighbourhood of Oakleigh and Murrumbena, where we secured as many of their beautifully-constructed bark-made nests, and lovely rich salmon-coloured eggs as we needed.

I myself witnessed ... once at Doncaster, 2nd November 1886 ... a flock of about fifty swept past me across a valley.

On the Helmeted Honeyeater: in 1884 Campbell was informed by fellow FNCV member AW Milligan that he had seen a large flock of the species in the vicinity of Olinda Creek near Lilydale. As it happened, the very first camp-out by the FNCV, organised in part by Campbell (Barnard 1906), was to take place in that area on the long weekend in November to mark the birthday of the Prince of Wales. During the weekend a nest containing an egg of the Helmeted Honeyeater was discovered by the bird party, led by Campbell. He later related the chain of events that ensued (Campbell 1900:400):

... the honour fell to the late Mr. W Hatton of detecting the first nest, with the rare honeyeater sitting. The nest was situated at a height of about twenty feet, and was suspended to an outstretched branch of a hazel overhanging the creek. With what ecstasy of delight the small tree was ascended! The handsome bird still retained possession of its nest. With Mr. Hatton's assistance, I all but had my hands on the coveted prize, when, without a moment's warning, crash went the tree by the root, and all – the two naturalists, tree, bird, nest and eggs – went headlong into the stream beneath.

The account goes on to relate how the nest and eggs were retrieved intact, because the bird continued to sit on it, despite being dunked in the creek. Three other nests, with eggs, were found subsequently in the area, and all the eggs probably ended up in either the National Museum of Victoria or in the cabinet of a private collector.

Conclusion

These were the customary practices and activities of members of the FNCV, as well as those of a lot of other bird watchers and collectors of the day. It would be wrong, certainly, to suggest that such activities were the sole, or indeed the major cause of the fact that this bird (Victoria's faunal emblem), as well as the Regent Honeyeater, is listed now as threatened (DSE 2008). Doubtless other factors, for example habitat destruction, were at play, contributing significantly to threaten and endanger the survival of these two and many other bird species. While we might take a somewhat different approach in our studies of such species today, this is perhaps due in part to the fact that there aren't as many of these birds around any more. In the past people obviously found them attractive, as we do today. But it seems that being attractive was their undoing, and the poor creatures were loved almost to extinction!

Although avian species were commented on from the earliest days of European settlement in the Melbourne area, the records are too lacking in essential detail to be of great value. As with any other animals, what is needed is closer, repeated observation of members of the species in the field, particularly over protracted periods. The beginnings of such measured study came with the formation and subsequent field activities of the FNCV. It is through the records created by these observers, published in the pages of *The Victorian Naturalist* and elsewhere, that we can begin to understand the characteristics of the birds that once lived in the suburbs.

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